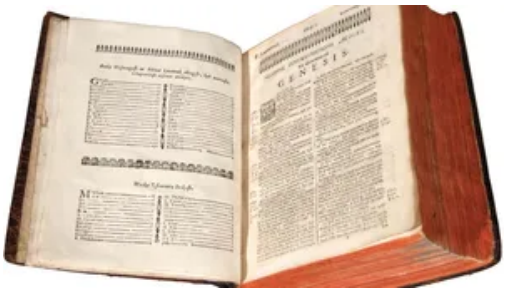
Genesis



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Genesis, Hebrew **Bereshit (“In the Beginning”)**, the first book of the Bible. Its name derives from the opening words: “In the beginning….” Genesis narrates the primeval history of the world (chapters 1–11) and the patriarchal history of the Israelite people (chapters 12–50). The primeval history includes the familiar stories of the Creation, the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, and the Tower of Babel. The patriarchal history begins with the divine promise to Abraham that “I will make of you a great nation” (12:2) and tells the stories of Abraham (chapters 12–25) and his descendants: Isaac and his twin sons Jacob and Esau (chapters 26–36) and Jacob’s family, the principal figure being Joseph (chapters 37–50), whose story tells how the Israelites came to be in Egypt. Their deliverance is narrated in the following book of Exodus. Genesis must thus be seen as a part of a larger unit of material traditionally understood to comprise the first five books of the Bible, called the Torah or the Pentateuch.

Scholars have identified three literary traditions in Genesis, as in Deuteronomy, usually identified as the Yahwist, Elohist, and Priestly strains. The Yahwist strain, so called because it used the name Yahweh (Jehovah) for God, is a Judaean rendition of the sacred story, perhaps written as early as 950 BCE. The Elohist strain, which designates God as Elohim, is traceable to the northern kingdom of Israel and was written 900–700 BCE. The Priestly strain, so called because of its cultic interests and regulations for priests, is usually dated in the 5th century BCE and is regarded as the law upon which Ezra and Nehemiah based their reform. Because each of these strains preserves materials much older than the time of their incorporation into a written work, Genesis contains extremely old oral and written traditions.

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